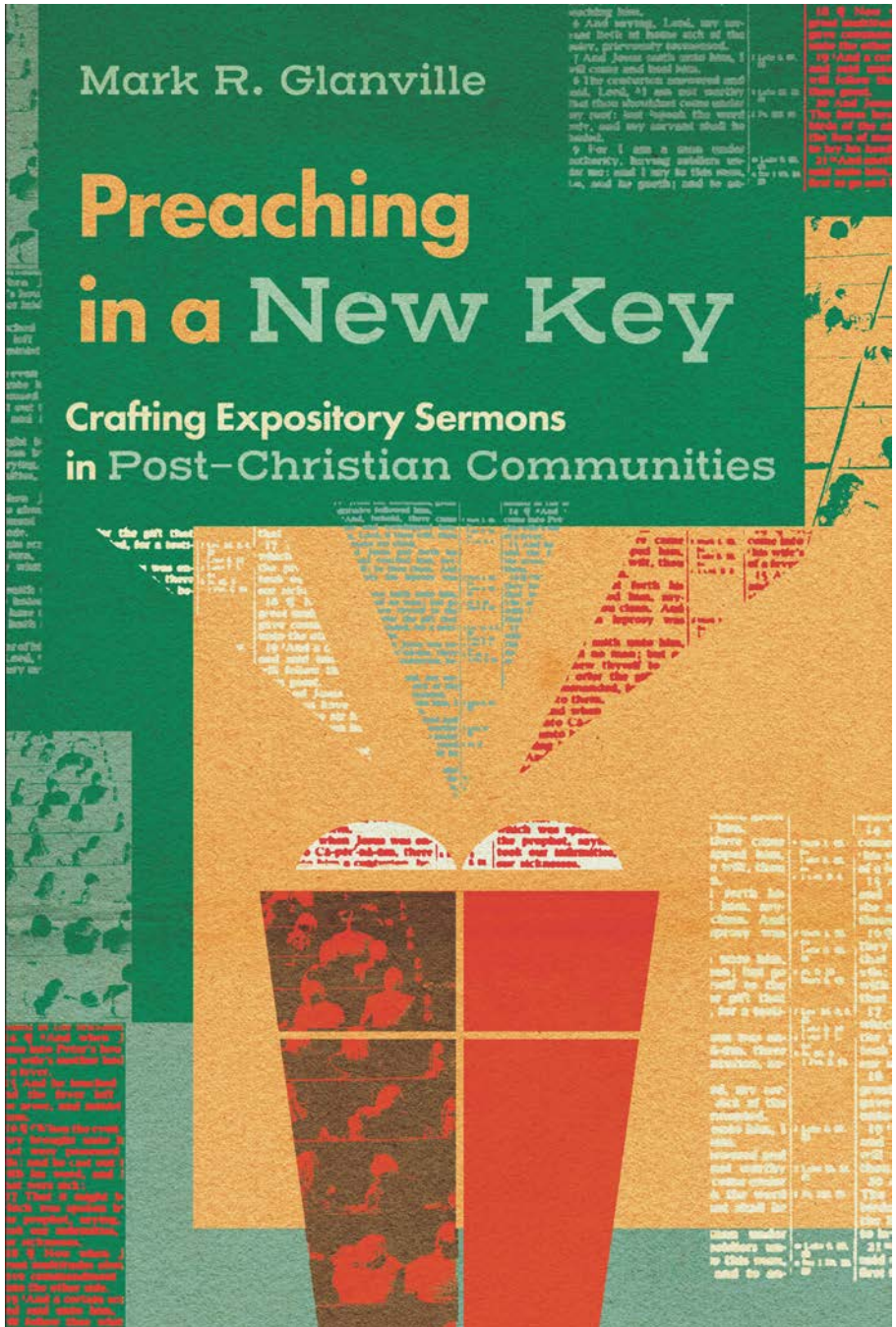


Mark R. Glanville

# Preaching in a New Key

## Crafting Expository Sermons in Post-Christian Communities



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suching him,  
 6 And saying, Lord, my ser-  
 vant hath at home sick of the  
 palsy, grievously tormented.  
 7 And Jesus saith unto him, I  
 will come and heal him.  
 8 The centurion answered and  
 said, Lord, I am not worthy  
 that thou shouldst come under  
 my roof: but speak the word  
 only, and my servant shall be  
 healed.  
 9 For I am a man under  
 authority, having soldiers un-  
 der me: and I say to this man,  
 Go, and he goeth; and to an-

# Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Introduction	5
Prologue: Preach the Word	23
<hr/>	
<b>Part One: Deeper</b>	31
1 Deeper Self: A Preacher’s Emotional Health	33
2 Deeper Church: Preaching to Nourish Our Shared Life	48
3 Deeper Context: Doubt in Post-Christendom	60
<hr/>	
<b>Part Two: Craft</b>	77
4 Composing	79
5 Artisan Skills	96
6 Playing with Heart	110
7 Preaching Sketchpad	127
<hr/>	
<b>Part Three: Tradition</b>	133
8 Learning the Tradition	135
9 Trusting the Tradition	150
10 Exegeting the Tradition	160
<hr/>	
<b>Part Four: Beauty</b>	171
11 Creativity	173
12 Posture	183
13 Church	195
14 Justice and Violence	206
Conclusion	217
<hr/>	
<b>Appendices</b>	
A Preaching on a Theme	220
B Preaching on a Short Text	224
C Monday-Through-Saturday Vocations	228
Sidebar Notes	230
General Index	234
Scripture Index	237

One

# Deeper Self

## A Preacher's Emotional Health

WHILE I HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED the significance of a pastor's inner life, I had not pondered the relationship between our inner life and the act of preaching until recently. Our whole life—our emotional, physical, spiritual, social, sexual, vocational, storied life—shapes our preaching and its outcome, sometimes more than the content. It is commonplace and important to speak about a preacher's prayer life. But that is where the conversation usually stops. Yet, spiritual and emotional health are inseparable. The vitality of a homily, the capacity of a sermon to revitalize, is affected by the interior condition of the preacher.

Our inner life turns up in Scripture more than we might realize. Consider the theme of friendship, for example, which is so vital for pastoral health. Jesus says to his disciples, "I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). In fact, friendship as a first-century concept is woven into the Fourth Gospel. Johannine scholar Martin Culy explains that, in John's Gospel, Jesus experiences an intimacy with the Father that "the Greco-Roman philosophers only dreamed of."<sup>1</sup> Jesus extends this intimacy to his disciples—"I have called you friends!"

**The vitality of a homily, the capacity of a sermon to revitalize, is affected by the interior condition of the preacher.**

<sup>1</sup>Martin M. Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 177.

This is great news, for we pastors and preachers *need* intimate friendships. A recent study on healthy pastoral ministry found that strong relationships with friends, family, and coworkers is the most important factor in pastoral resilience.<sup>2</sup> The example of Jesus' friendship gives us courage to step out and risk real friendships. As Gail O'Day writes, "We can risk being friends because Jesus has been a friend to us."<sup>3</sup> Friendship is just one aspect of a healthy inner life, a healthy inner landscape, that can infuse our preaching. The biblical story shows us that God has created us as whole people: emotions, sexuality, physicality, and sociality included (e.g., Ps 139:14). It all matters to God, as we will see in chapter eight.

As I mentioned, I missed the importance of attending to our inner life for *preaching* until recently. I had a light-bulb moment when I was teaching a course on preaching. A member of the class, Samantha, was preaching on Ruth 2. Sam's sermon was a high-quality narrative retelling of Ruth. It was gripping. Sam had worked with street-adjacent people in Sydney, Australia. She began her sermon by telling us how she had been sitting with a friend who was experiencing a drug overdose. Her friend's heart stopped beating for a time, and she came close to death. As Sam told her important story in the sermon's introduction, she had an edge in her voice, even a hint of anger. She ended the introduction by stating that we needed to see the humanity in this woman. I noticed in myself that, while I strongly shared Sam's convictions, I was not drawn into Sam's experience.

Next, Sam dropped into the body of her sermon, a masterful retelling of the story of Ruth, an entrepreneurial outsider who becomes enfolded under Yahweh's wings. Sam's retelling was full of imagination and fascinating historical background. She made me feel like I was standing in the barley fields of ancient Bethlehem. I noticed that as Sam dropped into this narrative, her voice calmed, her face relaxed, and she even smiled; her eyes sparkled with excitement.

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<sup>2</sup>Cameron Lee and Aaron Rosales, "Self-Regard in Pastoral Ministry: Self-Compassion Versus Self-Criticism in a Sample," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 48 (2020): 18-33, here 26.

<sup>3</sup>Gail R. O'Day, "I Have Called You Friends," Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008, <https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-12/friendshiparticleoday.pdf>.

When Sam finished, we discussed her sermon as a class. All agreed that the sermon was quite wonderful. Yet I was curious about the difference between Sam's introduction, which left me disengaged, and her narrative, which captivated me. I had a hunch that whatever had happened in the introduction often happened in my own preaching, so I wanted to understand it.

One student reflected that not all congregants would have agreed with Sam's take on the woman who suffered the overdose and that she could have lost people at that moment. I responded that it was important to challenge our congregations on issues of justice and marginality, and yet how can we seek to bring people along with us as we do? Taking a curious posture may have been helpful. Sam could have connected with her heart, sharing briefly what happened to her friend and how it affected her. Instead of expressing certainty, she could have been honest with us about her own uncertainties. She could have said, "I still don't know how to process the suffering of my friend, and I'm coming to Ruth 2 for guidance. Perhaps in the noble and marginalized figure of Ruth we might meet my friend. We might even meet ourselves."

Having made that comment, I sensed that I still had not gotten to the heart of the disconnect I had felt during the sermon's introduction. Intuitively, I felt that the issue was deeper than shifting the content. As the whole class continued to converse, seeking to understand what had happened, I saw a connection I had not noticed before. I offered to Sam that her introduction sounded as if it were delivered from her "defended self." I was emotional as I spoke, for it was dawning on me that I preach, time and time again, from my defended self.

Betty Pries, an author and conflict consultant, uses the term "defended self" to describe "the self we develop to hide our vulnerability." Pries writes that our defended self is that part of us that emerges when our selfhood is threatened.<sup>a</sup> Our defended self lies behind our negative self-talk; for example, "Now I've proved that I am a poor leader." It is the source of self-congratulatory assumptions, such as, "I'm the only one holding this place together." We often preach from our defended

self when we have unresolved anger at the congregation. In difficult pastoral circumstances, a cycle of conflict and preaching from our defended self can continue for years and years.

When Sam had preached the introduction, I felt that she was angry at me. I felt that she was assuming that I did not care, or that if I did care, I would not change how I lived. What was energizing Sam's emotions? What backstory explained her inner experience?<sup>4</sup> Sam may have been unconsciously energized by one hundred frustrating conversations she had had where others minimized the humanity of vulnerable people like this friend. Perhaps Sam had had an experience of feeling unnoticed by significant people earlier in her life, and she was afraid of her opinions being unnoticed by us. Whatever Sam's motivation was, I can relate. My defended self shows up, to a greater or lesser degree, in every sermon I preach. Often I am not even aware of it.

But Sam did not stay in her defended self. As she dropped into the narrative of Ruth 2 as a skillful storyteller, her face relaxed. Sam put the beauty of this story on full display as she ingeniously interwove narrative movement with historical details of daily life. I could feel that she loved this story and she loved us. Now Sam was at her best. Buoyed by the beauty of the story and the joy of using her aesthetic gifts, she had shifted from her defended self into her "deeper self."

Betty Pries describes our deeper self as "the most intimate layer of our selfhood . . . sometimes simply known as the place of one's heart."<sup>b</sup> Our deeper self is anchored in God and in who God has created us to be. Our deeper self is integrated in heart, mind, body, and community. We know when we are living out of our deeper self (rather than our defended self) when our faces are relaxed, we are open to connection to others and to God, and we are feeling flexible and creative. In our deeper self, we are aware that we are beloved and that those to whom we are preaching are beloved. Our

<sup>4</sup>On the ways in which our backstories can animate our defended self, see Betty Pries, *The Space Between Us: Conversations About Transforming Conflict* (Harrisburg, VA: Herald, 2021), 125-27.

sense of being beloved is connected to our love for others. When I am stuck in constant anger at my congregation (or at an individual), I can check in and recognize that I am failing to remember that these people are God's beloved. At the same time, I realize that I have also forgotten that I am God's beloved.

As Sam retold the narrative of Ruth 2, her face relaxed. As Sam's face relaxed, our faces as listeners relaxed. We might say that our emotions *coregulated* with Sam's emotions. In one-on-one conversations, we mirror our emotions to each other through our facial expression—if we are angry, then the other person becomes angry, and so on. So it is in preaching. Preacher and hearers coregulate with each other in the dialogue of preaching—emotions flow in both directions. Sam took us for a stroll through the fields of barley; as we walked, she relaxed, we relaxed, and we all became ready to receive. Coregulation in preaching is a delicate dynamic. When we are preaching, it is not always the emotion that we consciously project that the congregation takes on; it may instead be an unexamined emotion.

### **Are You Called to Preach, or Are You Offloading Trauma?**

A call for preachers to pursue holistic health is not a call to adopt a psychological model but a call to faithfulness, a call to Jesus. After all, do we not desire to hear God's address in Scripture? Yet, if we do not do this inner work, our unrecognized wounds may influence not only how we preach but even how we read Scripture. If our goal is to read Scripture clearly, to respect others, to nurture healthy churches, and to demonstrate humble honesty about what we bring to the preaching task, we need to do this inner work.

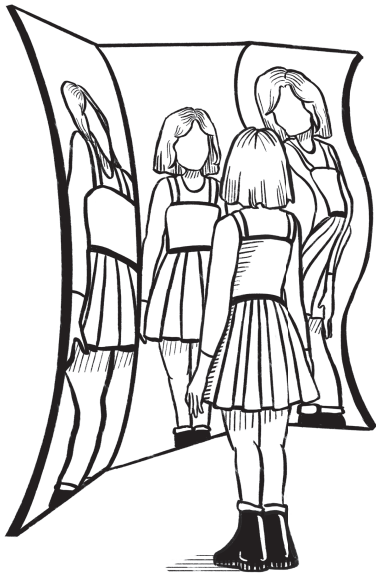
It is commonplace in training psychotherapists to say, "The most important tool in transformation is *you*." The most important element in therapy is that the therapist is truly present, anchored in their deeper self. What does this mean for preaching? If preaching from our deeper self leads to a transformative encounter between us and our listeners (through the work of the Word and Spirit), then we need to give attention to our health in an integrated way.

Pries recommends thinking of our personhood as three “selves.” Our three selves are our (1) descriptive self, (2) defended self, and (3) deeper self.

1. Our descriptive self is our God-given attributes and personality.
2. Our defended self is the masks we wear to hide our vulnerabilities.
3. Our deeper self is our unmasked center, where we rest in our belovedness.

Our *descriptive self* is our given attributes: our voice quality, height, personality, life history, and so on. While these qualities may change over time or be renegotiated, they are fairly constant. In preaching, we rarely transcend our descriptive selves. We exegete, write, and preach with the gifts, limitations, and characteristics that we have at that period in our lives.

Yet, it is impossible to preach only from our descriptive selves, for we also have an inner world, whether we are aware of it or not. Like Sam, I sometimes preach from my *defended self*, I sometimes preach from my *deeper self*, and I usually preach from a combination of the two. Think of looking in a mirror that is deliberately curved, the kind of mirror that used to be installed in showgrounds (i.e., fairgrounds) fifty years ago. If you stand at the



center of the mirror, you see yourself as you usually appear. Let us think of that as your descriptive self. If you move your head slightly to one side, you see another image of yourself. Let us say that is your defended self. And if you move your head slightly to the other side, you see your deeper self. All three selves are a part of you, and you bring all three with you as you stand before the people of God to preach.

Sam’s sermon helped me to realize that I want to preach from my deeper self as much as possible. This is when

a transformative encounter between me and my listeners is most likely to happen, by the power of the Spirit. The key is self-awareness—to grow in my awareness of what it feels like to preach from my deeper self or from my defended self. I will speak more about this later. We do not have to be fully healed to preach out of our deeper self, but we need to be fully alive to our brokenness. Staying alive to our brokenness allows us to be aware of the ways it may animate our emotions and speech. Staying alive to our brokenness is like sitting in the ashes after the fire has cooled, moving them around with dusty hands, being present to our pain.

**We don't have to be fully healed to preach out of our deeper self, but we need to be fully alive to our brokenness.**

It should not surprise us that we often preach from our defended selves. Pries tell us that our defended self develops when our foundational needs are not met or are threatened. She suggests that we have five foundational needs: *belonging*, *recognition*, *self-determination* (or *autonomy*), *security*, and *meaning*.<sup>5</sup> When these needs are not met, our defensive self creates a barrier around us, a bit like the shell of a sea snail, protecting us from further threat. Our defended self is not our enemy; rather, true to its name, it is defending us, acting as a shield so that we are not shattered.

Every day, our foundational needs are unmet in one way or another. Yet, it is sobering to reflect that being a preacher—and particularly being pastor—often puts our foundational needs directly under threat. Think of our foundational need to *belong*. A pastor's need for belonging can be threatened by the twin realities: the church is our primary community, and yet we are its spiritual leader. The result is that we play a dual role in every relationship (e.g., I am in the role of friend, and yet I am also your pastor). Or think of our need for *self-determination* and for *security*. My church's influence over my salary, housing, hours of work, and other aspects of my life can threaten these needs. Our need for *meaning* can be threatened by our church's resistance to change. Can you relate to any of these examples, or is your experience different?

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<sup>5</sup>Pries, *Space Between Us*, 53.



Our wounds go further back than the time we were first invited to preach. At a recent conference, psychologist Danielle Vriend Fluit urged us pastors to become familiar with our “inner caves.” Our inner caves usually have many strange figures lurking there, dating back into childhood: “Our cave contents may be our attachment wounds, our unmet needs, or the lifelong struggles that shape our relationships with self and others.” Fluit challenged us, “We have a moral, ethical, and spiritual obligation to know, as best we can, how our historic hurts impact us and possibly ooze onto others.”<sup>6</sup>

What does this mean for preaching? Our inner lives are a force all to their own, powerfully influencing our exegesis and preaching. Our inner worlds are like undulating waves on which a boat helplessly rises and falls. Sometimes when I am listening to a sermon (including my own sermons), in my head I am silently asking the preacher: “Are you called to preach, or are you offloading trauma?” Even when we can acknowledge the significance of our inner lives, it is nonetheless infernally difficult to recognize when and how it is in charge of our preaching.

## Genuine Dialogue

The stakes are high, for preaching from our deeper self can lead to a genuine, healthy, and transformative preaching encounter. Let us go a step deeper in our analysis. Pries maps the three aspects of self onto Martin Buber’s conception of three kinds of dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Buber differentiates between (1) technical dialogue, (2) monologue disguised as genuine dialogue, (3) and genuine dialogue. These correspond to our descriptive self, defended self, and deeper self, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

First, *technical dialogue* encompasses the many surface-level conversations that allow us to live life together. Much of our speech is, by necessity,

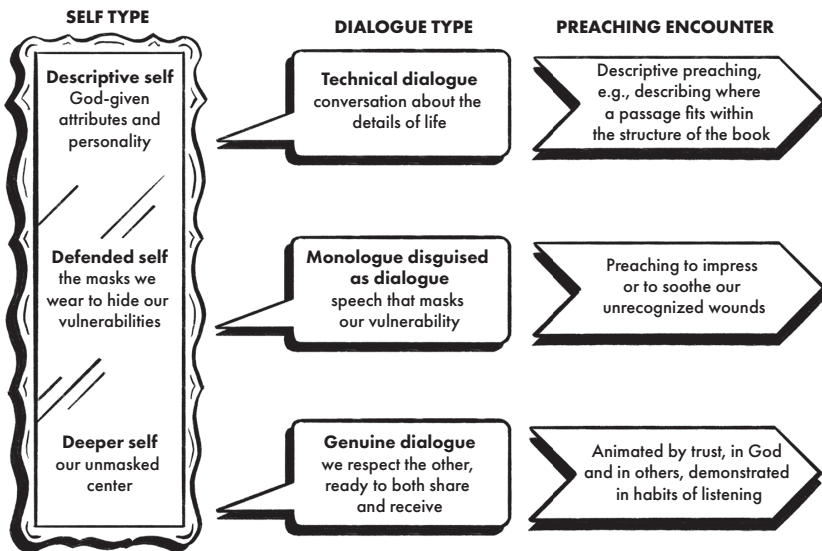
<sup>6</sup>Danielle Vriend Fluit, “Looking In to Look Out,” lecture given at The Gathering, Regent College, May 2023.

<sup>7</sup>Pries, *Space Between Us*, 105-10.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 22-23.

technical dialogue; for example, “I’ll be home at seven.” Second, *monologue disguised as genuine dialogue* emerges from our defended selves. This kind of dialogue includes speech designed to wound or impress. It includes conversations where each person is more eager to speak their mind than to listen. Third, *genuine dialogue*, which comes from our deeper selves, is an authentic encounter of persons, where each is ready to give and to receive. In Buber’s words, each person turns to the other “with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.”<sup>9</sup> Buber says that genuine dialogue is rare.

It may seem strange to use the word *dialogue* in relation to preaching. The word *dialogue* here does not imply that the congregation is responding verbally; rather, it is that preaching entails a two-way encounter. Let us consider how Buber’s three kinds of dialogue can map onto the experience of preaching.



How much of our preaching is genuine dialogue, speech where we have taken off our defensive masks and become open to God and to our people, full of trust? How much of our preaching is monologue disguised

<sup>9</sup>Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 22.

as dialogue, animated by unrecognized wounds? Of course, we can never separate from our wounds, since they are a part of us. But if we acknowledge our wounds, doing the hard work of facing them honestly while seeking health and integration, then we are not controlled by our wounds. We have found for them an appropriate place in our lives.<sup>10</sup>

### Our Descriptive Self Is Interpreted by Our Hearers

While our descriptive self (our given characteristics) may change over time, our descriptive self is also vulnerable to being interpreted by others. How people interpret our descriptive self can greatly affect our experience of preaching. For example, many women notice a difference in the way people listen to them, compared to men, as they speak up front. They observe the ease with which many men stand up in front of a congregation and expect that people will listen to them—and people do listen! Women often prepare what they say up front with extra care, knowing that if they stumble in their words (even words spoken from their deeper self), this will only reinforce for some listeners their unconscious assumption that women do not belong up front.

If this is your experience, God may be inviting you to anchor in your deeper self (in Christ's love), being aware that your presence up front is an unspeakable gift both to your church and to the wider body of Christ. Know, too, that many people feel a great relief when they notice that a woman will be preaching, relieved that they will be free from the negative emotional triggers they can experience during sermons delivered by men.

### Recognizing Our Defensive Self

How can we preach from a place of health and in a posture of genuine dialogue? One strategy is to learn to recognize the signs of health and illness in our preaching. Learning to recognize these signs is a lifelong

<sup>10</sup>See further Pries, *Space Between Us*, 124-27.

journey of growing in self-knowledge. For starters, if you want to gauge the health of your preaching, ask yourself, “Am I preaching out of frustration with my congregation today?” A contemplative pastor may be frustrated by the congregation’s lack of prayer. A tired pastor may be frustrated at the congregation’s lack of engagement. Whatever it is that frustrates you will inevitably leak into your preaching—you are only human. So, be alert to when you are preaching out of frustration.

Another sign: Do you love your people as you stand and preach to them? This, too, gauges your inner condition. Do you regard them with compassion? When you regard others with compassion, you are also having compassion for yourself. And check in with yourself: Are you preaching to impress? To sound smart or clever? Or maybe because of how you want to be received or perceived?

Another indicator: Are you preaching and crafting vision in connection with the church community and in the flow of your shared life together? Or are you detached from the pace of your community, floating above or racing aggressively ahead?

A further warning sign is when there is an absence of flexibility and creativity in how you approach a particular issue or biblical theme. When we are highly stressed, our *sympathetic nervous system* naturally shifts into high gear, and we experience a fight/flight/freeze response. Neurologically, then, it is almost impossible to be creative, flexible, or empathic. But when we are anchored and at peace, our *parasympathetic nervous system* is activated, giving us space for creativity and empathy.<sup>11</sup> Check in: Are you flexible and empathetic?

A subtle lens, one requiring discernment, is recognizing the shape of your desire for your congregation to be transformed. This is nuanced, for preachers always desire that the Spirit will transform themselves and their hearers by the Word. Yet, how we communicate a need for transformation reflects our interior condition. How can we hold out the Word of life while also allowing others to be others, not co-opting them to our program? Can

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<sup>11</sup>Bonnie Badenoch, *The Brain-Savvy Therapist's Workbook* (New York: Norton, 2011), 137-38.

we offer an invitation genuinely and humbly, trusting in God’s timing for our community?

Another sign of unrecognized wounds: Do you reduce the complexity of humanity? For example, there is a tendency among pastors to emphasize our rationality while denying the importance of emotions. Scriptural knowledge is objective and rational, the thinking goes, so by mastering Scripture, I have all I need for faithful ministry; emotions are nice but not necessary. Yet, there is no such thing as an unemotional person. Here is the hard truth: if you do not recognize your emotions, then you are almost certainly controlled by them. When we deny our emotions, we are at a risk of doing damage to others and of falling into grave moral error.

Much of this chapter has been devoted to emotional health. Let us now broaden our lens to other aspects of our health: our spiritual, emotional, physical, social, intellectual, and sexual lives.

## Flourishing

The pursuit of holistic health could not be more important for preachers. A recent study of Gen Z’s experience of religion, titled “Navigating Uncertainty,” describes this cultural moment as “a season . . . marked by . . . failures in leadership and broken trust.” Among Gen Z respondents, 39 percent identified as having been harmed by religion. Forty-five percent of respondents said they “don’t feel safe when it comes to religion.”<sup>12</sup> Given the marred perception of Christian leadership, the potential to do harm, and the litany of moral failures, we preachers must do all we can to live full, joyful, relational, and embodied lives. We need to pursue health with the same energy and commitment we apply to our sermons.

A foundation for healthy and effective preaching—preaching as genuine dialogue—is our health in every domain of our lives, including the spiritual, physical, emotional, sexual, social, and vocational. None of these domains can be ignored, for they are all intertwined and interdependent. For example, regular physical activity can improve mental wellness, as well

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<sup>12</sup>Kevin Singer and Josh Packard, “Uncertain and Unbundled: Are You Ready for Gen Z?,” *In Trust* (Autumn 2021): 5-7.

as creating opportunities for social connection, fostering a sense of gratitude to God.

## Integrated Health: Checking In

Why does pastoral ministry have an uncanny ability to steer us toward ill health? While there are undoubtedly problematic structures in pastoral ministry, that is not the whole story. Another culprit is the delightful, all-absorbing richness of pastoral ministry. As one who has worked both as a pastor and as a jazz musician, I have insight into this. Pastoring and playing jazz are all-absorbing in the very best kind of way. They ask of us our heart, our spirituality, our all. This is both a delight and a danger. This obsessiveness of playing jazz is one reason why so many of the early modern jazz greats destroyed their lives with heroin (Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, etc.).<sup>c</sup> And it is also one reason why preachers neglect their health: it's so good, we never put our instrument down.

When you have finished reading this chapter, you might consider pausing to journal, taking stock of your life in its various domains. You might reflect in these ways:

- **Social:** Since relationships are the most important factor in pastoral resilience,<sup>d</sup> ask yourself: Do I have close friends outside my pastoral role? What do I need to change in order to increase opportunities for significant friendships? If I am stuck in a conflict-anger cycle with my church, who are the voices who can speak life into my situation?
- **Spiritual:** What are my prayer practices? How do I most naturally connect with Jesus (in silence? Outside, in creation? With others? Serving others? etc.)?
- **Physical:** What is my exercise routine? Do I need to work through an injury or health problem with a physiotherapist or doctor?
- **Emotional:** What is my emotional landscape? Do I need help with an issue in my life? What refreshes me emotionally? Do I have self-compassion?<sup>e</sup>

- **Sexual:** Is sexuality a joyful and healthy part of my life? What is my relationship to my body? (A desire for intimacy with others can be expressed in many ways, including close and deep friendships.)
- **Vocational:** Is my current role a good fit? Is my work life good for my soul? How can I increase my vocational flexibility? And do I have a meaningful hobby?

### Grounded in Christ

I have spoken at length in this chapter about emotional vitality and preaching. Spiritual vitality is crucial, too, ever interconnected with emotional vitality. Who we see ourselves to be in Christ permeates everything: we know our belovedness in him, know our need for him, receive our healing from him, are convinced that Christ is the clue for our community, the clue for the creation. Christ is everything when it comes to preaching.

In our lives, year by year by God's grace, we grow in wisdom for living well in God's world. Then, as we stand before our people, we offer the Word and we offer ourselves. We stand anchored in Jesus, aware of our weakness and of Christ's strength. Because we are fully alive to Jesus, we are compelling; and because we are fully alive to our brokenness, we are strong. We have already said that we mirror our inner condition to our people as we preach, coregulating with others; and yet in an even more profound way, we mirror Christ to one another. As we do, Christ calms our fear and gives us our reason to live.

### Reflection Questions

1. Can you recognize a time when you spoke from your defended self, whether to a friend or up front as a communicator? What did it feel like?
2. What does it feel like to speak from your deeper self? What is happening in your inner world? How does your bodily posture reflect this state?
3. Do you personally know a preacher who seems to regularly preach from their deeper self? Can you ask them about their lifestyle, how it creates holistic health?

4. When you stand before a group of people, in what ways do your listeners tend to interpret your descriptive self? How do you think Christ might encounter your descriptive self?

### **Practical Takeaways**

- Consider the ways in which the shape of the pastoral vocation can threaten your five foundational needs.
- When you are speaking on a topic that has a lot of heat, whether for you or for your listeners, it may be helpful to take a curious posture.
- Do an integrated health check-in every few months.

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